

CASE 33

Chinsô Has One Eye



By Yamada Kôun

Instruction:

He does not distinguish between east and west; he makes no division between north and south. And this from morning till evening, from evening till morning. Will you say he is asleep? Sometimes his eyes are like a shooting star. Will you say he is awake? Sometimes he calls south "north." Just tell me, is this mindfulness or mindlessness? Is he an enlightened sage or an ordinary man? If you can pass through this and for the first time discern the ultimate place, you will truly know the "yes" and "no" of the ancients. But just tell me, which time is this? I'll try to show you an example, look!

Case:

National Minister Chinsô went to see Shifuku. When Shifuku saw him coming, he drew a circle. Chinsô said, "Your student has come, and that's already a failure. Why do you bother to draw a circle in addition?" Thereupon Shifuku closed the door of his room. (Setchô said, "Chinsô has but one eye.")

Verse:

Circular jewels go round,
Gems ring pure and clear.
Loaded on horses, donkeys, iron ships as well;
Share them with people of no matter,
Coming from land or sea.
Fishing for a giant tortoise,
He sometimes lowers a hook and line.
Setchô spoke again saying,
"Not a monk under heaven can jump out."

On the Instruction:

As often happens, the Case seems to be talking about matters of no great significance. Viewed from the Zen standpoint, however, the Case has much to offer us.

The Instruction from start to finish is an allusion to the Case. In the Case we meet two

personages, National Minister¹ Chinsô and Shifuku. Which of these two men is the Instruction referring to? It could be either of them, but I prefer to think that the Instruction is alluding to Shifuku.

Shifuku was grandson in the dharma to Kyôzan, founder of the Igyô School of Zen Buddhism. Among Kyôzan's disciples was Saitô, and Shifuku was Saitô's disciple. In this case, National Minister Chinsô comes to engage Shifuku in dharma combat. Chinsô was a layman but apparently quite an accomplished Zen person. He was a disciple of the famous Bokushû Chinson-Shuku. Bokushû, on his part, practiced under Ôbaku and was an elder brother in the dharma to Rinzai. How he made Rinzai go to dokusan is a well-known story. Bokushû was quite a severe and strict person, so his dharma heir, Chinsô himself, must have been no ordinary person. Yasutani Roshi feels, however, that Chinsô is still of an insufficient caliber compared to Shifuku, and I tend to agree. Therefore, I would like to take this instruction as referring to Shifuku.

He does not distinguish between east and west; he makes no division between north and south. And this from morning till evening, from evening till morning. He cannot clearly differentiate between "east and west," neither can he sufficiently distinguish "north and south." He seems to be in a state of absent-mindedness. And this state of mind goes on "from morning till evening, from evening till morning" – that is, the whole day through. There's no way of knowing whether he really understands what's going on around him or not. A line in the *Hôkyôzammai* corresponds to this:

Practicing in secret, working within;

Like a fool, like an idiot.

This kind of personality seems to be characteristically oriental. The sages and saints of the West are not like this; their eyes flash with sharp intellectual perception. Even when they reach the level of deep spiritual peace, we don't expect them to be "like a fool, like an idiot." But, strange to say, this is true for many of the saints of the East. Take, for example, Lao Tzu: he too is "like a fool, like an idiot." The same thing in Buddhism: when outstanding persons reach a very high level of spiritual maturity, they go into a state which never allows you to clearly say whether the person is stupid or intelligent. Some lines in the *Shôdôka* refer to the same reality:

Don't you see that leisurely man of the way?

Having finished to learn, he has nothing more to do.

He neither avoids delusions nor seeks truth.

This is exactly what the Instruction is depicting. "From morning till evening" he seems to be straying here and there, without being able to find the way out.

Will you say he is asleep? Sometimes his eyes are like a shooting star. Is he sleeping? But sometimes his eyes flash forth fire! He could be compared to a live electric wire: it might not look dangerous at all, but touch it and you'll get a real shock. It's a little frightening, isn't it? That's just about the feeling toward the personage in question.

Will you say he is awake? He seems to be sleeping, but sometimes his eyes sharply

¹ The title shôsho implies a high government official comparable to a minister or chief of an administrative office.

glisten. Is this fellow awake or not?

Sometimes he calls south "north." He often says things that go against common sense. He points south and says, "This way is north." This type of thing occurs quite often in Zen. For instance, "What is the meaning of the patriarch's coming from the West?" – "A shit-stick!" [*kanshiketsu*]. Or "What is Buddha?" – "Three pounds of flax!" [*masagin*]. These kinds of dumbfounding, seemingly contradictory replies are not at all uncommon.

Just tell me, is this mindfulness or mindlessness? Is he an enlightened sage or an ordinary man? Does he have a clear consciousness of his own or not? Is he an ordinary person or a sage who has attained the highest way? It's very hard to tell.

If you can pass through this and for the first time discern the ultimate place, you will truly know the "yes" and "no" of the ancients. If you can truly see through such a person and come to appreciate his "ultimate place"² – that is, his spiritual destination, his world of absolute peace – then for the first time you will know what the ancients are talking about when they say "yes, yes" [*immō*] and when they say "no, no" [*fu-immō*]. The ancient Zen masters would sometimes approve saying, "Right, right!" and sometimes disapprove saying, "Not right, not right!" Such masters are free to give life by saying, "Yes, yes" and to kill by saying, "No, no" to whatever the person brings to them. But if you do not see through that Zen master to the very bottom of his or her inner core, there is no way of knowing where this action comes from, since he or she usually seems to be in a total fog, just like an idiot or a fool, like an ass or donkey. Such a person is actually one of the ideal personality types in the East. In the present Instruction this image is applied to Shifuku.

When reading over this Instruction, I happened to recall a curious story known as "The Cat's Mysterious Art."³ Let me tell you this tale now.

The story is supposed to have been created by a certain scholar who spent his life immersed in ordinary city life during Japan's Tokugawa period⁴. The story appears in a collection by this author and is extremely interesting. Once there was a swordsman living in a town by the name of Shōken. His house was inhabited by a big rat, a bold rascal that would come out and run around the house in broad daylight. The swordsman shut up the room where the rat was holing up and shoved in his own cat. But instead of catching the rat, the cat had its nose bitten and fled out of the room howling in pain. This wouldn't do! So, Shōken scouted around the neighborhood, bringing back four or five tough-looking tomcats which he put into the room where the rat was. They were all big strong cats, but the rat was extraordinarily speedy and spunky. The cats not only failed to catch the rat, they ended up being bitten by the rat. Shōken was at his wits' end, so he took up a wooden practice sword intent on finishing off the rat once and for all. But the animal was so swift and tricky that Shōken did nothing but run around in circles and work up a terrible sweat. Then he had an idea.

He had heard that there was an outstanding cat living in the neighborhood, an old tomcat which still enjoyed a reputation for being truly excellent. Shōken borrowed this cat, and put it

² *Rakusho*, literally: "the place where one falls into."

³ The book the Rōshi mentions here is not available any more. But there is a German translation of the same story: K. Graf Dürckheim, *Wunderbare Katze und andere Zen-Texte*, Weilheim 1964.

⁴ 1603-1867.

in the room that the rat occupied. The cat ambled slowly into the room, and the rat became completely paralyzed with fear, unable to move an inch. The cat walked slowly over, immediately grabbed the rat with his teeth, and came out of the room.

Interesting, isn't it? Now, that night, all the cats in the neighborhood assembled together, with that old cat presiding over the whole assembly. Let's briefly follow the text: "That night, all the cats involved gathered together in that house, and had the old cat sit in the senior seat. They all bowed deeply in front of him and said: 'All of us are known as outstanding masters of our trade and have trained assiduously in the art of rat-catching. Not confining our activities to rats, we have all caught our fair share of weasels. But not one of us had ever met up with a rat like that one and we made grave errors. But what technique did you use to catch that rat so easily? We would appreciate it very much if'" They all wanted to know his secret. The old cat smiled and said, "Each of you is quite an accomplished rat-catcher. But none of you is yet familiar with the deepest principle, and that's why you failed. In this connection, could each one of you tell me just what training you have undergone while disciplining yourself in this art?"

Then: "One sharp-looking black cat came before the old cat and said, 'I was born into a family of rat-catchers, and had my eyes set on the rat-catcher's way from an early age. While still a kitten I learned all the tricks and sleights-of-hand: I can jump over a seven-foot embroidered screen and squeeze through the smallest hole.... But when I met with that rat today I suffered the first real defeat of my career....'"

Then the old tomcat had his say: "Oh, what you have learned is simply *action*; you do not know that there is a *heart-mind* [*kokoro*] to be learned." Yes, you're certainly no amateur in this field, but what you disciplined yourself in is only what you can see with the eyes, mere visible movements. You haven't learned anything about the 'heart-mind.' Since no attention has been paid to it, you are destined to fail.

Next a big tiger-striped cat made his way to the front and began telling about the training he had gone through. This time the old tomcat said, "You say that you haven't just concerned yourself with external actions, but have developed your inner spirit as well. To be sure, such inner spunk and spirit is important for the way and you've really advanced quite far. But there's still a long way to go. Spirit alone is not enough."

Now a gray tomcat, somewhat advanced in years, padded quietly in front of the old tomcat and said, "In the real way of the warrior—by which is meant rat-catching here—it's absolutely necessary to have harmony [*wa*] of mind. Just having a sharp spirit is not enough; you need true harmony in your soul. No matter what confronts you, you don't consider it to be your enemy. This has been my way of training, and up to now it's served me in good stead. But that rat today was really more than I could handle!"

The venerable tomcat said: "I understand what you mean by harmony of mind. But this harmony of mind you're talking about is still something you consciously try to maintain. There's still a mental effort involved in attempting to gain that harmony of mind. You are still caught up in thoughts like, 'I mustn't consider the opponent my enemy' or 'I must maintain harmony of mind.' That's why your 'harmony' isn't really authentic." The old master went on to say: "I've made various critical comments about all of you, but I'm not at all implying that any of your practice is without value. There's certainly a deep principle underlying 'actions.'

I would never deny the importance of inner 'spirit,' for you must definitely have a good store of such spirit. 'Harmony' of mind is also, needless to say, very important. Nevertheless, you mustn't be totally caught up with any one of these. You are truly authentic only when you have practiced to the point where none of them becomes an impediment. I have come to that level," the old cat taught.

In Zen, that would be the stage of "Just this" [*tada kore kore*]. It means the level where there is no more willful thinking at work, nothing more to get caught up in. The old cat then went on to say that there is no final destination on the way. "I have yet to arrive at the very highest level," he said. "It might seem like something to go in and paralyze that rat with fear and then catch him with no trouble at all. But this is not the highest art. There was once a cat, however, who did attain the highest level. He was in my neighborhood, and used to just sleep the whole day long. He seemed to be totally without life, as if he were made of wood. No one had ever seen him catch a single mouse. And yet, where the cat was, there was not a single mouse in his neighborhood. Wherever the cat happened to move, one could observe the same thing in his new vicinity. I once went to him and asked him the reason for this. He didn't answer. Well, it isn't right to say he didn't answer; he didn't even know what to answer at all!"

The old cat was telling the others that they had to practice until they reach this level. That is the main outline of the story. It goes on to tell how Shôken the swordsman overhears this discussion, is duly impressed, and showers the old cat with questions.

The old cat mentioned at the end of the story, which spent the whole day sleeping, corresponds to the reality depicted in the line, "He does not distinguish between east and west; he makes no division between north and south. And this from morning to evening, from evening to morning." Nobody knows if the cat is asleep or not, but whenever he's around, there's not a mouse in sight. We certainly must come to this point in our practice, and that's why I was reminded of this story. Now, let's go back to our main topic.

But just tell me, which time is this? I'll try to show you an example, look!

On the Case:

National Minister Chinsô went to see Shifuku. When Shifuku saw him coming, he drew a circle. Chinsô said, "Your student has come, and that's already a failure. Why do you bother to draw a circle in addition?" Chinsô, a lay student of Bokushû, was a "National Minister". When Shifuku saw Chinsô coming, he quietly drew a circle. To draw a circle is to put the essential world into effect. However, in the realm of the essential world there is no coming or going, neither questioner nor one who answers. So, Chinsô says that his very act of coming to Shifuku has already left a scratch on the perfect surface of the essential. "I have come in this way and that is already too much. Why then do you draw a circle in addition to that?" There is a Japanese saying: "A tear-streaked face invites the bee's sting"⁵. Just the act of Chinsô's coming is already a blemish on the essential. But then to go on and draw something like a circle! That's just one more blemish, so why on earth was it necessary?

⁵ *Nakittsura ni hachi*, which implies that misfortunes seldom come singly.

It was characteristic among students of the Igyô Sect to use their surroundings to express the essential. They used the objective world and objective things to make their point. In this instance, Shifuku drew a circle. What is this? This is a symbol of the essential world. He has drawn what absolute perfection is. But it is not the circle itself, but rather the very act of drawing it which is a perfect expression of the essential. Chinsô, on the other hand, infers that having a circle drawn for him is already an embarrassment. Thus he has shown a spirit which has broken out of that circle, in order to reveal his essential self which is not bound by the "circle" but free from it.

Thereupon Shifuku closed the door of his room. Shifuku immediately slams his door shut. What is this? The instruction mentioned, "Sometimes his eyes are like a shooting star." Shifuku is showing his true mind: "What are you babbling about? I have no time for you. Go home, go home!" No speech follows. Nothing remains except absolute silence. Nor does Chinsô offer a word in reply. At least, nothing is reported in the koan. What could have been a possible response? He could have bowed deeply and said, "Thank you very much for your answer!" But here he didn't do anything.

Setchô adds his own comment: **Chinsô has only one eye.** Chinsô has one eye open, but it's still just one eye. He has yet to open both. He has spent too much time chattering about this and that, and can't escape being called a mere "one-eye" when compared with Shifuku. His eyes are certainly not closed, but they are merely half open.

On the Verse:

Circular jewels go round, gems ring pure and clear. There are countless round jewels, and they ring out as they strike against each other. How do they sound? Maybe "Ting-ting-ting!" There is an infinite number of these round jewels. Do you understand what I mean? I often make use of a fraction to express it. For the denominator I write a circle for zero with the infinity sign within. Each and every thing is IT. Everything has our essential nature, and that's IT. So there are a limitless number of "circular jewels." Zero and infinite at the same time; everything is IT. That's what the line implies: "Circular jewels go round, gems ring pure and clear."

Loaded on horses, donkeys, iron ships as well. Horses and donkeys as well as iron ships are all loaded with this overflowing cargo of jewels. This means that they fill up the entire universe; the entire universe is full of jewels.

Share them with people of no matter, coming from land or sea. But the persons to whom you should give them must be "people of no matter" [*bujino hito*], regardless of the dwelling place – in the mountains or by the shore. "People of no matter" are just like the old cat in the story, who has nothing more to do but to sleep the whole day long. It is a Zen person who has completely mastered the way through endless and painstaking study: practice, practice, practice, and at last, there's nothing left to do. How we wish to be someone like that! Now you would want to share the jewels with those people, since only they would understand the value of the jewels.

Fishing for a giant tortoise, he sometimes lowers a hook and line. In this line, the phrases have been reversed. It actually means that when he lowers his line he sometimes catches a tortoise. This is a special, gigantic tortoise that swims along with three mountains

on its back. This great tortoise is a metaphor for a truly outstanding Zen person. In order to catch such an outstanding Zen person he sometimes throws out a hook and a line. The one doing the fishing here is Shifuku and the tortoise is Chinsô.

Setchô has the final word: **Setchô spoke again saying, "Not a monk under heaven can jump out."** There is not a single monk in the entire world who can jump out of this circle. It can't be jumped out of at all. If you want to jump out, that action of jumping out is the circle itself, so you're back again! You can't get away from it. The essential world is always with you.